New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1952

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1952 PRODUCTIONS

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Dear Barbarians"

Daily Mirror

February 22, 1952

'Dear Barbarians' Is Slow Starter, Finishes Strong

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"Dear Barbarians," which Gant Gaither brought to the Royale Theatre last evening, introduces a promising new playwright named Lexford Richards. He has a nice comic sense, phrases laughs neatly and has a compassionate understanding of what makes mortals tick. We only wish he were a more expert dramatist.

The new arrival has to do with a couple of youngsters who almost spurn marriage because of the example set by the boy's parents. The boy, a musician, is temperamental, explosive and difficult to live with. He is a replica of his father, but hates the idea. The girl is an up-and-coming ceramist who serves as something of a doormat for the guy because she loves him.

The banker father wants to break up the match because he thinks the girl is a gold-digger, and the mother because she doesn't consider her from the right social sphere. Their efforts eventually backfire, for the youngsters realize that the elders have really been in love for 30 years despite their frequent differences.

It is regrettable that Richards' plotting and motivations are flimsy. For an act-and-a-half, it's difficult to understand why any of the characters behave as they do. Only in the last act are adequate reasons advanced. The final stanza, by the way, is the best. It has hilarity and heart. It reaches the level, in spots, of high comedy.

Gaither, doubling as director, hasn't been of much help to Richards. He hasn't had the invention and the resource to hide script defects. As the producer, however, he has been fortunate in casting two expert and ingratiating players as Mr. and Mrs. Fiske. They are Violet Heming and Nicholas Joy.

Miss Heming and Joy probably didn't need much direction. They know every trick in the book, and use them all to advantage. They are wonderful troupers. Cloris Leachman, as the girl; Donald Murphy, as the boy, and Betsy Von Furstenberg, as a socialite nightclub singer, make the most of their opportunities, particularly Miss Leachman.

"Dear Barbarians" has so much to recommend it that you wish it had enough. Though it doesn't quite come off, it serves notice that we may expect, one of these days, a first-rate comedy from Richards. And we should be grateful that it has brought Miss Heming back to Broadway. There aren't many of her stature around now.

Incidentally, Gaither provided something of a novelty via a gaily caparisoned instrumental quartet, which set the mood for the three cantos. Perched in boxes, they proved startling at first, but wore well as the evening progressed.

"DEAR BARBARIANS"

Comedy by Lexford Richards; staged by Gant Gaither; scenery and costumes by Jack Landau; presented by Mr. Gaither at the Royale Theatre, February 21, 1952. The cast:

Alexander Fiske..... Donald Murphy
Mr. Fiske..... Nicholas Joy
Alice..... Cloris Leachman
Mrs. Fiske..... Violet Heming
Lorraine..... Betsy von Furstenberg

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 22, 1952

"Dear Barbarians" Opens at the Royale

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Dear Barbarians" is a misguided venture. Billed as a comedy, it reaps laughs from some remarkably pertinent playing by actors in the lesser roles. More of the time it wrangles its way through the evening, traveling on the theory that a lack of sense of humor is uproarious, and tasteless jokes hilarious.

The basic intent of the play is hard to pin down. It sounds as if the author has started writing about his characters for quite a while before he settled on what he really wanted to say about them.

Incongruous Situation.

He has told with some detail the story of a young couple living together without being married, while the boy's parents try to interest him in another girl.

This situation is hard to take, as the young man blasts any genuine romantic element in the relationship by continually asserting that he is only trying to fall in love with the girl.

In the final scene, the boy's mother explains what is apparently the author's theme. It is not crystal clear, but seemed to imply that the same misunderstandings that disrupt a casual liaison, are part of the lasting fabric of a genuine marriage.

The central couple are played by Donald Murphy and Cloris Leachman. It is remarkable that they remain as personable as they do under the circumstances, because they spend most of the evening snarling laboriously.

The funniest stretch of the performance is the early half of the second act, when Betsy von Furstenberg is in evidence as the parents' choice for their son. She has an honest, bland way of playing that makes laughs out of thin air.

Nicholas Joy as the father similarly has the trick of playing straight with enough exaggeration to project his points. He wins laughs right and left with what is, on the face of it, a pretty humorless and disagreeable man.

It Picks Up Later.

Violet Heming is chipper and fussy as the mother, and has by far her best scene near the end when she is trying to explain to her son just what it is that binds her to his father.

The performance gets off to a heavy start, without pace or levity. The actors play as if they were reading the script in a drawing room. This manner effects certain surprises, but it does little to demand or hold one's attention. Later on the play acquires much more energy, but its intention is too dispersed to make real points.

A band in a box is elaborately spotlighted in the intermissions, and its music leads into the action of the play in a vague manner. This theatricalism in the auditorium sets a tough standard for the activity on the stage.

The New York Times

February 22, 1952

Lexford Richards' 'Dear Barbarians' Is a Comedy About the Mating Wiles of Civilized Women

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Looking haughtily at "Dear Barbarians," which opened at the Royale last evening, one of the first-night savants remarked: "This is like the stuff they did in Greenwich Village twenty-five years ago." That is an exaggeration. Greenwich Village was never so young.

* * *

For Lexford Richards, the author, writes as though his best years were ahead of him. Knowing all about the wiles of women, he has written a comedy that shows how mother trapped father into marrying her a long time ago, and how Alice is trapping their son into marrying her today.

Mr. Richards can write lines that snap back and forth two or three times and he can write big exit speeches that set the audience to applauding—happy, perhaps, that an actor has left the stage. These are accomplishments in playwriting and they indicate that Mr. Richards has his eye on the ball. If "Dear Barbarians" were produced as the senior class play in a dramatic school, the faculty, as well as the fathers and mothers, would beam with pleasure and hope.

But Mr. Richards' bright lines are isolated phenomena that do not build a play and leave "Dear Barbarians" without a theme until the last act. Then father roars at mother, and mother declares that she has had a sad life; and Mr. Richards is obviously drawing a deadly parallel between the older and the younger generations. Since he is privy to the mating wiles of the predatory sex, this is the significant part of his play, and it ought to be a lesson to everyone, like "Man and Superman," for example. Shaw and Mr. Richards are fundamentally in agreement, differing chiefly in the quality of their workmanship.

As producer and director, Gant Gaither has the courage of his convictions. "Dear Barbarians" is handsomely produced. Jack Landau's setting of a bachelor apartment overlooking the fashionable East River and his nicely blended costumes keep Mr. Richards' comic homily on a high plane, and Abe Feder has lighted everything lusciously.

Cloris Leachman and Betsy von Furstenberg make the younger generation seem worth while. They play the parts of rival girls who are incomprehensibly competing for the hand of a singularly repellent young man. In addition to being pleasant to look at, both Miss Leachman and Miss von Furstenberg can act with subtlety and charm, no doubt proving Mr. Richards' thesis. For Donald Murphy, who plays the young man, is a good deal less engaging and versatile.

* * *

Representing the older generation, Nicholas Joy, draped in an expensive suiting, barks, bellows, snarls and snorts amusingly, supplying the most enjoyable comedy of the evening. As the weary wife, Violet Heming contents herself with flirting with the audience and maintaining a certain detachment toward the play. Doubtless she heard all this bickering between the sexes in Greenwich Village years ago, when the anti-romantics were reporting the truth about women, and doubtless she can't take much interest in it now.

New York Post

February 22, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Melancholy Comedy About Sex

Broadway rumor, which we should all know better than to trust, had hinted that "Dear Barbarians" was going to turn out to be this season's "The Moon Is Blue," and I can only say that those responsible for spreading the rumor have a far lower opinion of both "The Moon Is Blue" and the season than I have. For the new play by Lexford Richards, which opened at the Royale Theater last night, is a wan and wistful striving after bright and youthful sex comedy that is dismally lacking in the required qualities of charm, humor and dexterity.

It does have its points, but they are few and very widely separated. In the second act, young Betsy von Furstenberg, who scored a personal hit last year as the ingenue of "Second Threshold," brightens things momentarily as a girl singer unaccountably interested in the hero, but the foolish fellow soon throws her out of his apartment, to the grave detriment of the play. Then, in the final act, which has the doubtful virtue of being the best of the three, Nicholas Joy is funny as he fiercely demands a cracker with his martini.

Point of View

After careful study, I am unable to report any other occasions in which "Dear Barbarians" aroused any particular interest. For the rest of the time, the going was of the heavy kind that is to be encountered in comedies that try to be bantering and gay and just a little devilish, and can't manage it. Apparently the play even seeks to have a point of view about the relations between the older and the younger generations, but it doesn't have any success here, either. Indeed, there is a singular lack of playwriting skill almost throughout.

The story the author is trying to tell is about a young man who hates his father and doesn't want to marry the girl he is living with because the spectacle of his parents makes him distrust matrimony. The mother and father are striving to break up the affair, and they almost succeed, until the boy finds that he is actually very much like the father he despises. This discovery might well have persuaded the girl to avoid the match as she would the plague, but, instead, it convinces the young people that they can't do without each other.

Lucky Actress

Although the small cast consists of pleasant and talented performers, it is my guess that only Miss Von Furstenberg comes out of the hapless proceedings with any gain in prestige. One reason, of course, is that, since she has a brief role, she doesn't have to entangle herself in the play's heavy maneuverings the way her unfortunate colleagues do. But her success isn't merely because she has the good fortune to do her scene and depart before things get really tough. It happens that she also possesses a fresh, engaging and original approach to light comedy.

Anyway, as soon as the hero has thrown her out of his life, the play, which had received a momentary lift, sags helplessly, despite Mr. Joy's pleasant fierceness about that martini. Cloris Leachman, who is a skillful young actress, strives gallantly as the heroine, and it certainly isn't her fault that things go badly. I am inclined to exonerate Donald Murphy, as the boy, and Violet Heming, as the mother, also. I can say of "Dear Barbarians" that it at least isn't the mess some of the year's comedies have been, but it is fairly dismal.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
February 22, 1952

'Dear Barbarians'

By WALTER F. KERR

The slogan for this morning is "Don't be half-smart." In "Dear Barbarians," Lexford Richards has written a belligerently smart comedy about some self-consciously smart youngsters and Gant Gaither has given it a super-smart mounting at the Royale.

But the author has caught only the manner of the sophisticate, not the sparkle, not the perception, not the wit. And because his five characters must behave with the conviction that they are devastating, when they are only being mildly flippant, they finally become trying indeed.

Mr. Richards is reworking the familiar business of the young couple who are living out of wedlock, and just waiting to be pushed in. His girl is secretly storing away funds for a wedding gown in a monstrous piggy-bank, snatching at every opportunity to trap her man into committing himself, and suspiciously checking on his extra-curricular movements with a staff of apartment-house spies.

His boy is a smug and domineering young composer who requires that a girl remove her lipstick and blow her nose before kissing him, and who, when a girl walks out on him, immediately assumes that she has committed suicide.

The trouble with these two young people, as the author has conceived them, is that they are just about as irritating as any designing young female and pompous young male would be if you had to deal with them personally. The author has made them outspoken, but not very funny. He has given them the attitudes of charm, but little to do that is honestly ingratiating.

A spick and span cast does all that it can to bring a nervous brightness to the proceedings. Nicholas Joy, as the boy's peppery father, does best. He sparks a long third-act scene, in which he is hard put to pose as a model of domestic bliss, into first-rate farce, and his blustering exit, to the announcement that he was once the "catch of Mt. Kisco" brings the evening its most explosive laugh.

Betsy von Furstenberg gets only a few moments in the second act to try on her talents as a comedienne, but she does make something delicious of a satire on night-club singing. Violet Heming is delightfully lemony as the boy's social-climbing mother, and her stricken efforts at speech in a crisis are far more amusing than anything the author has written for her. She even does extraordinarily well with a last-minute switch to pathos; the scene is an unlikely one for a farce, but Miss Heming takes it in stride.

As a charter member of the Cloris Leachman Fan Club, I felt for this promising young actress in her attempt to strain some humor from the cryptic and occasionally cloying things she is required to say. Most of the time Miss Leachman is being physically assaulted: slung over shoulders, locked in closets, and flung out of apartment doors. In addition, she has been given uninteresting costumes and a decidedly unflattering coiffure. She is still, though, a winning personality, and I hope that part will come along.

Donald Murphy struggles bravely with the part of the stuffy young pianist, and Jack Landau has backed up the willing performers with a trim yellow and gray set. Setting and performers are themselves so attractive, in fact, that with the beginning of each act the comedy seems to take a new lease on life. But the author's hand soon descends, that sinking feeling sets in, and no amount of polish can overcome the banalities of a trivial and tiresome script.

Journal American
February 22, 1952

A Few—Very Few—Good Moments

By JOHN McCLAIN

There are a number of highly gratifying items connected with "Dear Barbarians," by Lexford Richards, which was presented by Gant Gaither at the Royale Theatre last night.

Cy Coleman and Trio, a gifted group of musicians, supply nifty music from an upper box before each act, and on the stage Nicholas Joy, Violet Heming and Cloris Leachman succeed quite occasionally in bringing to life, through sheer genius of timing, a series of extraneous lines which makes the audience laugh.

But there the entries in the credit ledger end; the rest is mostly red ink. Mr. Richards' play is an incredible shambles of nonmotivation, involving a young man who has been keeping house with a young woman, his two ridiculously contrived parents and the obvious society doll who is supposed to bring him to his senses.

Tale of Boy and Girl

I will not belabor you with the details beyond the fact that there is: (1) the scene where the boy takes for granted the girl who is really desperately in love with him; (b) the scene where the girl realizes this and walks out; (c) the scene where he tries to make himself fall in love with the acceptable society doll; (d) his realization that he really loves the original girl, and (e) fade out.

Interspersed between these monumental moments are some truly hilarious bits by Mr. Joy and Miss Heming, who play the boy's parents. Mr. Joy delivers a wonderful interpretation of The Terrible Tempered Mr. Bang, aided superbly by his stage wife, but the whole episode would not suffer if it were taken out of the show and presented at the Palace as a sketch.

Cloris Leachman, the ever-loving heorine, who is not truly appreciated until 10:25 p.m., puts up a game battle. She even fights her way through a scene where the father walks into his son's apartment and takes her for the maid.

* * *

Does Her Best

It is difficult to have an honest opinion about either Donald Murphy, who plays the young man, or the widely-publicized Betsy Von Furstenberg, as the society miss, since I never for one moment believed either such character could be real.

I think Betsy, particularly, made the best of her big scene, but it would be more advisable to put the word "big" in quotes and hope she gets a better shot elsewhere.

Jack Landau devised an authentic and workable set and I suppose Mr. Gaither, who directed, performed a perfectly creditable job within his limits.

But that Cy Coleman and Trio in the box—they're solid!

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

February 22, 1952

'Dear Barbarians' a Mild Comedy

By JOHN CHAPMAN

A comedy by Lexford Richards, "Dear Barbarians," was produced by Gant Gaither at the Royale Theatre last evening. To coin a slogan, it's mild, but it doesn't satisfy. There isn't anything acutely wrong with it—grammar's all right, set's okay, actors are pleasant, and so forth—but it just isn't interesting enough to warrant much of a report here.

Donald Murphy seems to be a young songwriter and Cloris Leachman, who designs china piggy banks, is his mistress. Has been for 27 months, which may account for the mildness. Nicholas Joy is Donald's cranky and dictatorial father; papa no like Donald and Donold no like father, but the point of the comedy seems to be, like father, like son.

Miss Heming Returns.

Violet Heming is Donald's mother; typical stage mother, all fluttery and vapid. And for one scene in the second act Betsy von Furstenberg appears so that Donald can make a pass at her. I bet next year's freshman squad at West Point can make better passes, in spite of all the deemphasis that's going around. Anyhow, Leachman and Furstenberg are nice-looking blondes.

When I left the theatre—and I guess it was at the end because people were applauding and putting on their coats and the actors were taking bows—it looked as if Murphy and Leachman would get married. I'll make another bet that they're going to have a dull married life, even if they do continue to live in a handsome little apartment designed by Jack Landau and lighted by Abe Feder.

"Mrs. McThing"

The New York Times

February 21, 1952

Helen Hayes in Mary Chase's Comic Fantasy Offered at the Martin Beck

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Mary Chase, who wrote "Harvey," has written another play that is equally original. It is called "Mrs. McThing." Helen Hayes and an excellent company acted it at the Martin Beck last evening. In the program it is learnedly described as "a comic fantasy." But it might simplify things to suggest that "Mrs. McThing" is a fairy-story that manages to combine "Alice-in-Wonderland" with Superman and Hopalong Cassidy. Being a humorist, Mrs. Chase has made the literary transition between Victorian times and modern times without patronizing either the old or the new.

Very possibly, children will like "Mrs. McThing" better than some of the old-fashioned pabulum that is set before them by worried parents. But there is no doubt that adults who still have a sense of humor will like it. For Mrs. Chase has a wonderfully unspoiled imagination that is never coy or precious. It is frank, wholesome and genuine.

* * *

It is also theatrical. Under Joseph Buloff's hospitable direction, "Mrs. McThing" can be acted with more enthusiasm than many of the plays that are written for adults alone. In view of the quality of this season, it is small praise to say that Mrs. Chase has written the freshest play of the year. But something like that must be said to indicate that she has made a genuine contribution to the literature of the current stage.

Don't be deceived by a literal description of the story. Told without the magic of the writing and acting, it may sound cloying. Mrs. Howard V. Larue, II, of fabulous wealth, is disturbed because her little boy is so polite and obedient. Good behavior is not normal for him. Presently it appears that the boy she is mothering at home is only a stick that the evil witch, Mrs. McThing, has palmed off on her. Her real son is hobnobbing with a mob of gangsters in town. That is what he has always wanted to do.

There is quite a long and startling tussle between Mrs. Larue and Mrs. McThing, and it results in the fact that for a time the rich Mrs. Larue finds herself sweeping the floors and washing dishes in a temperamental restaurant operated by the mob. In a fairy-story, however, the plot is less significant than the incantations. Mrs. Chase's magic spells are comic, some of them uproariously comic, because her feet are on the ground.

* * *

There is a suggestion of good-natured satire in the contrasts she draws between the nervous life of wealth where Mrs. Larue normally lives and the hearty life of the common people where she has to work for a living. Mrs. Chase's literary style is American and very much her own. But her point of view has a little of "The Madwoman of Chaillot" in it.

Call it a very happy holiday for the actors. They can really let go and dance along Mrs. Chase's lunar rainbow. As Mrs. Larue, Miss Hayes gives one of her most comic performances—modest and ladylike on the surface, but bubbling over with sunny humor. It is probably broader than her acting for "Happy Birthday," but the broad strokes point up Mrs. Chase's writing and never over-reach the character and they are infectious and captivating.

Although the cast is a long one, everyone who is in it contributes something amusing to the fable. Jules Munshin's story-book gangster, Iggie Wolfington's temperamental chef, Enid Markey's caricature of a society lady, Paula Trueman's skittish maid are perhaps the most conspicuous, although they do not overshadow the acting in the other parts.

* * *

Two of the actors are children. Brandon de Wilde, the light-hearted child in "Member of the Wedding," has two long, rather detailed parts as the boy and the simulacrum of a boy. He is expert, clear, forceful and winning again. An ideal sprite, whose parents call her Lydia Reed, is skillful and completely enchanting as the busy, determined little daughter of the witch.

Lester Polakov has designed two comically distorted sets that match perfectly the tone of the writing; and Lucinda Ballard has provided unhackneyed costumes that admirably communicate the same crackbrained mood. This is the second of the current Anta series. It is delightful. Thank Ireland for Mrs. Chase's rich, make-believe sense of humor and her compassion for the needs of adults and children.

"MRS. McTHING"

Comic fantasy by Mary Chase; staged by Joseph Buloff; scenery by Lester Polakov; costumes by Lucinda Ballard; presented by the American National Theatre and Academy (Robert Whitehead, managing director) at the Martin Beck Theatre, February 20, 1952. The cast:

Mrs. Howard V. Larue II.... Helen Hayes
Carrie..... Mary Michael
Sybil..... Paula Trueman
Evva Lewis..... Enid Markey
Maude Lewis..... Marga Ann Deighton
Grace Lewis.. Mildred Chandler
Nelson..... Ernest Borgnine
Boy..... Brandon de Wilde
Chef (Ellsworth)..... Iggie Wolfington
Waiter (Virgil)..... William Lanteau
Dirty Joe..... Irwin Corey
Stinker..... Fred Gwynne
Poison Eddie Schellenbach.. Jules Munshin
Mrs. Schellenbach..... Minnette Barrett
Howay..... Brandon de Wilde
Mimi..... Lydia Reed
Radio Voice..... Al Saxe
1st Policeman..... Solen Burry
2nd Policeman.. Robert Sagalyn
Crone..... Elsa Freed
Fairy..... Ann Buckles

DAILY NEWS

February 21, 1952

'Mrs. McThing' a Darling Fantasy And Helen Hayes Is Superb in It

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Mary Chase, who made life joyful with the memorable "Harvey," has brought us another big load of cheer in "Mrs. McThing," which was played last evening at the Martin Beck Theatre by the incomparable Helen Hayes and a grand company of comedians. The program describes the play as a comic fantasy — a description I endorse with enthusiasm. It is a whimsical, lovely and lovable work for young children and old children like this reporter, and one will have to go back to the great "Peter Pan" to find anything with which to compare it.

Mrs. McThing is a witch who has adopted a foundling girl, and she is a ferocious mother. If her little Mimi is in trouble with any human beings, Mrs. McThing fixes them, but good. And so it is that Miss Hayes, a terribly rich and terribly stylish matron who lives on an enormous estate, gets into trouble when she won't let the ragged and messy Mimi play with her pampered son, Howay. Mrs. McThing simply removes Howay from his home and puts in his place a stick which looks just like Howay. This substitute is plain poison—proper, polite to his elders, obedient to his mother and scrupulously washed.

And where does the real boy go? He goes to the Shantyland Pool Hall Lunchroom, a most peculiar place which is headquarters for mobsters named Poison Eddie Schellenbach, Dirty Joe and Stinker. The chef of this lunchroom is a temperamental fellow who plays an imaginary piano and won't serve people unless he likes the sound of their names. It doesn't take Miss Hayes long to suspect that the too-perfect boy in her house is not her son, and she goes looking for Howay. Mrs. McThing strikes again, and Miss Hayes finds herself washing dishes and sweeping the floor in the lunchroom while another stick impersonates her in her mansion.

This is gay, heady stuff. Miss Hayes is giving the most resourceful, most endearing performance imaginable, and the rest of the cast gives her grand support. Brandon de Wilde and Lydia Reed are just fine as the little boy and the little girl. Never was there so raffish and rascally a trio as are the mobsters, Jules Munshin, Irwin Corey and Fred Gwynne. No other short-order cook in this world is like Iggie Wolfington, and Enid Markey, Marga Ann Deighton and Mildred Chandler are hilarious as three of Miss Hayes' snobbish friends.

Mrs. Chase's play was written for children, but it makes plenty of sense and plenty of fun for grownups. There is an aura of great affection all around it. Congratulations to everybody, including Lester Polakov, whose two sets have the right imaginative quality. The producer, the American National Theatre and Academy, has found a wonderful worry-chaser. Surely "Mrs. McThing" must last longer than the three weeks it has been scheduled for.

Journal-American

February 21, 1952

Mary Chase Gets Snarled in Her Plot

By JOHN McCLAIN

Mary Chase, the author of "Harvey," which has played all over the country for the past decade with everybody but Willie "The Actor" Sutton in the leading role, last night brought to the Martin Beck Theatre a new slice of whimsy entitled "Mrs. McThing."

This latest endeavor was presented by the American National Theatre and Academy as part of their series for 1952, with a cast including Helen Hayes, Jules Munshin and Brandon de Wilde.

It would be gratifying to report that Mrs. Chase has surpassed her earlier effort, or that "Mrs. McThing" in its own weird way had the ingredients of a success, but I'm afraid neither is the case.

I don't believe even the superlative performances of Miss Hayes, Master de Wilde and an incredible young lady named Lydia Reed are sufficient to sustain the meagre and frothy premise which the author endeavored to stretch into an entire play.

• • •

Amusing Incidents

In "Harvey" Mrs. Chase employed a large rabbit (who wasn't there) to regenerate her characters. That was certainly oblique enough, but in this case it is a witch called "Mrs. McThing" who lives on top of a mountain and is endowed with the power of being able to remove humans from their existing social niche, banishing them to an underworld dive, and replacing them with exact replicas who are guilty of none of their odious imperfections.

Thus Miss Hayes' perfectly normal son (Brandon de Wilde) is suddenly snatched away and exchanged for a little monster (Brandon de Wilde), who talks and behaves like a chapter from Emily Post's First Reader. The real son is in the meantime having himself a fine time living in a joint called "The Shantytown Pool Hall Lunchroom."

When she goes in search of him she finds that she, too, has been transplanted, and is now a scrub woman in the same establishment.

There are some very amusing incidents resulting from this situation, such as the time Miss Hayes calls her house and finds herself talking to herself, and of course in the end both mother and son are restored and everything is greatly improved all around.

I would love to tell you about it in more detail but, frankly, the details of the last two scenes escape me.

• • •

Just Sensational

I guess that's my quarrel with the whole evening. You start out with a simple premise, however fey, and you hope to build it to a reasonably uncomplicated conclusion, something you can explain to almost anybody in less than five minutes with less than five-syllable words. This, I submit, is not possible with "Mrs. McThing."

All of which is said, naturally, without consideration for the superb charm and talents of Helen Hayes, who can do no wrong in my glossary. She completely dominates the proceedings from the moment the curtain goes up, but there are many times when one wishes her character and her lines could be given more credence.

Brandon de Wilde is absolutely sensational in his dual role, as is this little Miss Lydia Reed, mentioned above. I have a private theory that they are both midgets, around 40-years-old, probably happily married.

Julie Munshin was convincing within the limits of his part and I thought Lester Polakov did a good job with the two simple and suggestive sets.

Mrs. Chase is a gifted writer, but this time I think she became entangled in a plot from which she never quite extricated herself.

Daily Mirror

February 21, 1952

'Mrs. McThing' Is Slapstick Lesson in Kindliness

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"Mrs. McThing," which the American National Theatre and Academy brought to the Martin Beck last evening, is just such a comic fantasy as Sir J. M. Barrie and William Saroyan might have penned together in an off moment. It combines whimsey and vivid imagination on the loose.

Having put fine feeling and gorgeous writing into "Harvey," Mary Chase appears to have typed "Mrs. McThing" as a rollicking release from the demands of distinguished dramaturgy. Helen Hayes, president of ANTA, also probably decided to star in it because of its lively, prankish mood.

Now, don't get the idea that Mrs. Chase hasn't invested her latest work with decent sentiment. She most certanly has, for her thesis seems to be: Stop being a stuffed shirt, a stick, and show a little kindness toward your neighbors. And there's an admonition to mothers: Don't expect your children to be perfect.

The haughty Mrs. Howard V. Larue II was rearing her small son in an ivory tower atmosphere. When a ragged, dirty little girl wants to play with the Larue scion, she chases the youngster away. That wasn't so good, for the girl's mother happened to be a vengeful witch, who replaced the normal little boy with an unbearable prig.

She sent the real boy off to be a dishwasher in a gangster's pool-room-restaurant. Later, when he was taken into the mob, Mrs. Larue was bewitched into substituting for him at the dishpan. Their experiences taught them to be human and see some good in everyone. Having learned a lot, they were restored to their original positions.

This lesson in kindliness is set forth in terms of slapstick rather than satire. It has a goodly quota of amusing moments and many that verge on the sophomoric. It is the type of extravaganza that an extremely gifted student might dash off for a Hasty Pudding or a Triangle Club campus romp.

Miss Hayes plays Mrs. Larue with tongue-in-cheek and infectious high spirits. She is probably having as much fun with this part as she did with that of the dowdy stenographer in the impish "Happy Birthday. And So distinguished an actress is certainly entitled to a lark now and then.

Jules Munshin, Fred Gwynne, Irwin Corey, Iggie Wolfington, Brandon de Wilde, Enid Markey, Minnette Barrett and Lydia Reed are among those in a large cast.

Joseph Buloff has staged the new arrival at a speedy, vigorous pace. The expressionistic settings by Lester Polakov and the humorous costumes by Lucinda Ballard are other assets.

The season's most enthusiastic audience roared appreciatively throughout most of the evening. It was apparent from their robust laughter and applause that they found "Mrs. McThing" quite wonderful. And at the curtain's final fall they cheered Miss Hayes. So it really doesn't matter that your play sampler shared their enjoyment but infrequently.

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'Mrs. McThing' Lifts Curtain on Dreams

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Mrs. McThing" reassures us that Mary Chase has an inventive comic writing talent for the theater that is quite simply without comparison.

Her "Harvey" made history. Now "Mrs. McThing" may very easily win as widespread international interest, as, say Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" has in practically every modern language.

The playwright speaks here with as clean-cut, simple a recommendation for moral behavior and charitable logic, as Aesop.

The Young Dream Mind.

She has told a story about children for parents, and about parents for children. Most of the time she dwells in a delicious world of wish fulfillment, dreamed up by the average comic book reading, television watching, young pre-teen man.

She employs magic and witches at will. They are never really as important as the free wheeling situations a youngster's mind creates, and his elders have to fit themselves into.

A very rich lady is rude to a tiny female trespasser who wants to play with her son. The little girl's mother, who is a witch, replaces the scion by a priggish stick, who is the embodiment of all the stuffy behavior the rich mother has thought she wanted in her boy.

Mom Is Enslaved.

The real son is meanwhile spirited off to a fine den of motley thieves, where he wins his spurs and is permitted to join the Mob.

In time his mother is similarly replaced, and becomes a slavery in the mock sinister gangland. The situation is crowned by a moment when the boy is ordered by the mob leader to give his mother a stiff talking to, because her work fails to satisfy.

In the end the rich mother, back home, finds that bribes of new animal pets, and an offer to freeze the lake in midsummer, are neither as welcome nor as magic as a little relaxed generosity about other people.

Wit and Horse Sense.

The comedy defies comparison, unless by kinship to Thackeray's "The Rose and Ring." It has the same sort of moral, magic, wit and horse sense.

Last night the company played to an audience that met its gaiety with all the co-operative bounce of wet cement. The crowd seemed to have no idea what to make of it all, and for the first act cautiously avoided committing itself.

The cast, and particulary Miss Helen Hayes, were forced to keep this downy play in air by the most superhuman call on wits and sinews. The Hayes team won, hands down, and in the end the house was cheering through a dozen curtain calls.

Magic in Full Bloom.

Miss Hayes' ingenious magic is in full bloom here, creating flecks of pathos and masses of humor The deftness and generosity of her reactions constantly enrich the performances around her. Looking like one of the Three Bruises from the Ice Show, she is staggeringly funny, aiming to please with a broom.

Young Bradon de Wilde is assured and enchanting in his dual role of the regular guy and the stuck-up replacement. He has a companion of pure enchantment in Lydia Reed, who at the age of 7 looks like a heartbreaker of the Mary Martin or Marilyn Miller class.

Jules Munshin leads a covey of cartoon mobsters straight out of Dick Tracy, and Enid Markey wins piercing screams from the auidence as the leader of a snobbish trio of sisters.

The sets have the zany look of Mary Petty's cartoons. With a couple more weeks of playing, the magical comedy would have dovetailed more tightly in certain spots. But what a breath of strictly fresh air with an entirely new flavor it is!